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ABSTRACT

New researchers on community colleges, such as Rob Rhoads, Estela Bensimon, Bill Tierney, James Valadez, Berta Laden, and Romero Jalomo, are exploring new conceptual frameworks to guide thinking about the transformation of community colleges from mere open-access institutions into colleges that make a difference in the lives of students who have nowhere else to turn. Although current policies and practices are very entrenched, this research might come to influence the next generation of college leaders. Rhoads presents the notion of multiculturalism as a conceptual framework by which to restructure the colleges, positing border knowledge, or that which resides outside of the canon, as a legitimate form of knowledge which should be recognized and rewarded. Valadez finds that the community college is organized to meet the needs of community employers as opposed to the needs of students, while Jalomo and Laden examine the experiences of Latino students and the effects on their learning and persistence. This new research points to a conflict between institutional survival and what is in the hearts and minds of students. Ultimately, if colleges merely offer the opportunity to learn vocational skills, they fail to fulfill the real promise of the community college: that even students from non-academic backgrounds can attain an education that goes beyond performing menial tasks and obeying authority. (BCY)

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AERA DISCUSSANT

Issues of Class and Culture in Today's Community Colleges

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First, I want to congratulate all of these fine young scholars for their efforts to lift our thinking and discourse about community colleges. Their work has certainly elevated what we know about two-year colleges as organizational entities and about the nature of the students that attend them. I am particularly pleased to serve as a discussant in this session because it places me in a situation that is relatively new to me-- the role of the senior scholar, the "old-timer" who is giving the next generation of scholars sage advice about their research. I am most proud to say that these young scholars are following the work I started as a graduate student about 13 years ago, and it is certainly rewarding that they are findings new twists, new conceptual frameworks, new knowledge to guide our thinking about just what it would take to transform community colleges to the point that they serve not only as open access institutions, but as colleges that really make a difference in the lives of students that have no place else to turn to.

I would only hope that two-year college leaders, particularly presidents and deans, would take this research and use it to begin think critically about their institutions in an effort to bring two-year colleges into the 21st century. I have to tell you, however, that I am not optimistic about the chances of this occurring very soon because policies and practices are so entrenched and most two-year college leaders are so defensive about their institutions that hopes for real reform are diminished with the present array of traditional two-year college leadership. On the other hand, I do believe that we can influence the next generation of community college leaders and I

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would hope that this most contemporary form of looking at the two year college would be disseminated and shared with future administrators, faculty, and counselors who would be bold enough to take the steps to transform their institutions.

So what is contemporary about the work of these scholars?

Rob Rhoads presents the notion of "multiculturalism" as providing a postmodern conceptual framework by which to restructure community colleges. He talks about the need to produce a multicultural community college that embraces multiple forms of cultural knowledge, organizational complexity, plural organizational identities and critical thinking. In essence, Rob believes that multiculturalism is not something to be studied. It is a framework by which traditional views of learning, organization, identity, and power relationships can be challenged, debated and perhaps resolved. Rob posits that border knowledge--that which resides outside of the canon, outside of the cultural mainstream-- can and should be a perfectly legitimate form of knowledge that needs to be recognized and rewarded. His thinking is very much in line with the excellent scholarship of Estela Bensimon and Bill Tierney who offer a postmodern view of organizations. Like Professors Bensimon and Tierney, Rob posits that organizational conflict is not a problem to be resolved, but an essential part of organizational life in the postmodern community college.
As he does so, I think of the students that James Valadez, Berta Laden and Romero Jalomo interviewed. These were immigrant students that crossed over an academic border for the same reasons that immigrants have for years crossed the U.S.-Mexico border--to find a new life direction, to get the training to get a decent job and improve their life condition. These are at risk students because what they already know is not valued or even acknowledged, because their realities are in stark contrast to the world of higher education and because they represent "the other"--these students are not perceived as serious or academically oriented.

James finds that the community college is organized to meet the needs of the community employers as opposed to the needs of the students. At Vocational college the focus is not on knowledge but on skills. Students who graduate from this college could be viewed analogously as robots who perform tasks in low-level jobs for low wages. It's not necessary to be a critical thinker or even to have a holistic view of the world at Vocational--all you have to do is learn the skills, obey the rules and be respect authority.

Romero probes the inner worlds of Latino students in community collages. In the process, he finds most of his students to be resilient--they've acquired knowledge through the 'school of hard knocks." In fact, it is almost amazing hat these students are in college given their invalidating prior educational experiences and the obstacles they encountered. In fact, these students had been socialized not to perceive themselves as college material and it is a wonder that they enrolled in college and that most were in transfer programs. Were it not for their family members, friends and former teachers who served as positive influences, these students might never have considered college a possibility.

Similarly, many of Berta's students were succeeding against the odds with the help and support of their family members and their own resiliency.

What these studies convey is that there is a culture clash that puts institutional survival in direct conflict with what is in the hearts and minds of students. Most community college leaders believe that the colleges survive because they provide a service to the community. The more graduates that go to work for a community, the better the image of the college and the more resources it is able to leverage.

Yet, I agree with James that students set their goals on what they believe is possible. Students arrive at decisions based on their past experiences and their interactions with people around them. And here is where I believe community colleges miss their mark. The

promise of the community college to me lies in the extent that it is able to convince immigrant students--those that cross the academic border--that it is possible to attain an education that goes beyond performing menial tasks and obeying authority. If all the community college emphasizes is the opportunity to learn vocational skills at the expense of diminishing other possibilities, it reproduces a class structure. The challenge is to help students see the broad array of possibilities, to provide students with enough information that will allow them to see the pros and cons of each of those possibilities and then making an informed decision.

We have to remember that most of these students are first generation and neither they or their families understand the world of higher education. Further, they have been told they will not be successful. They have received messages that make them question their ability to go to college. Low expectations have been set for many of them.

I want to return to Bob's paper because what I think needs to happen is for community colleges to adopt a new framework for the 21st century and beyond. This framework ought to be based not on what's good for the institution and its survival, but on what's good for students and their role in society. Rob believes that community colleges ought to come to terms with serving a culturally diverse student clientele by enacting multiple organizational roles and embracing multiple forms of cultural knowledge, including border knowledge.

James posits that community colleges ought to validate student knowledge--that working class students ought to share and build upon the stores of knowledge that they bring to campus. In addition, James argues that notions of good work ought to transcend rote memorization of specific tasks. Good work should incorporate the need for learning how to communicate, analyze problems or compute. What's contemporary about what James proposes is the partnership relationship between the community college and employers. Just as the community college can shape student futures

so can it challenge employers to create more democratic work settings in which employees can make use of critical thinking, communication and creative skills.

Berta's study leads us to think that even students who have been labeled "at risk" can succeed and that the institution can and must play a critical role in helping these students see themselves as successful. And the value of Romero's study is that it illuminates the factors that shape student expectations even before college enrollment, as well as the in- and out-of-college factors that enhance or preclude the ability of students to cross the academic border and become involved in institutional life.

Yet, I believe we need to push the notion of multiculturalism as a framework to organize community colleges much further. Certainly many community colleges already operate with much diversity, including students, faculty, staff and organizational mission. What needs to change here is that community colleges need to view this diversity not as a problem, but as a strength. Yet, we need more specificity about how this can happen. What is the new role of community college presidents in building and functioning within the conflicting contexts of a multicultural community college? Does building a multicultural college require rethinking the institution's mission? And what about faculty? What is their new role in terms of reinventing the curriculum and rethinking classroom practices and polices? How do faculty get rewarded in a new multicultural community college?

One of the biggest changes in this new vision of a multicultural community college is building a democratic curriculum based on varying cultural representations of people. We know that Berta and Romero's students--those likely to be labeled "at risk"'--we know that their issues, their backgrounds, their realities are not well represented in the infrastructures of the community college. Thus, it appears that a new multicultural community college would need to be based on a new framework--one that not only validates border knowledge, but

one that removes the invalidating elements of community colleges and instead validates students for who they are and what they bring to college. This will require a pretty substantive assessment of what community colleges are doing and not doing for students. Further, it requires bold, assertive and forward-looking leadership from presidents and faculty to create a new paradigm for validating and incorporating prior knowledge, delivering instruction, connecting with students and energizing the curriculum with powerful perspectives that transcend the traditional canon.

The work of Belenkey and others as noted in the book, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, and some of my own work on validating students provide helpful insights as to how institutions of higher education can go about educating students such as women, minorities and first generation students who are so often treated as 'the other."
In short, at this point, I think we are doing a pretty good job providing a conceptual framework for transforming the community college. Now we need to work on filling in the details that presidents and faculty need to build a multicultural community college.

This is precisely the kind of research that we need to help guide our thinking about community colleges which continue to serve the most diverse, and perhaps the most challenging students in higher education. For me, it is a tragedy that community colleges are not known for their success in helping these kinds of students to transfer and earn baccalaureates. It is a tragedy that low expectations continue to be set for these students. It is a tragedy that students are not helped to see the possibility of a long range future that relies on a solid academic preparation. It is a tragedy that community colleges have not embraced the notion of multiculturalism and instead have chosen to see themselves as avenues to jobs that simply require skill competencies as opposed to critical thinking that promotes functioning in a complex society.

Yet, in each of these papers I saw not only thoughtful research, but a glimmer of hope for community colleges. I hope that this next

generation of scholars who critically examine two-year colleges can provide the impetus for meaningful reform and better student outcomes in the years to come.